Endless chase to reinvent Kennedy in a modern era

By Marianne Means

As we approach the 30th anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination, we are inundated once again with television specials, books and magazine articles purporting to cast new light on his celebrated life and premature death.

They will never get it right.

But they will never stop trying. There's gold in all that historical revisionism. It sells.

Even President Clinton got into the act, trying to co-opt the Kennedy legacy by claiming that he is standing where Kennedy would have stood if faced with one of today's major policy issues, the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Speaking at the dedication of the new John F. Kennedy Library Museum the other day, Clinton said, "I believe if President Kennedy were still representing that (Cambridge) seat in Congress, he would endorse it (the NAFTA)."

It was not the first time Clinton had tried to wrap himself in the JFK mantle, but it was the first time he was so presumptuous as to claim he knew how Kennedy might have felt were he alive.

Clinton did have some philosophical basis for his assumption. Kennedy was indeed in tune with the internationalist, free-trade concept behind NAFTA and

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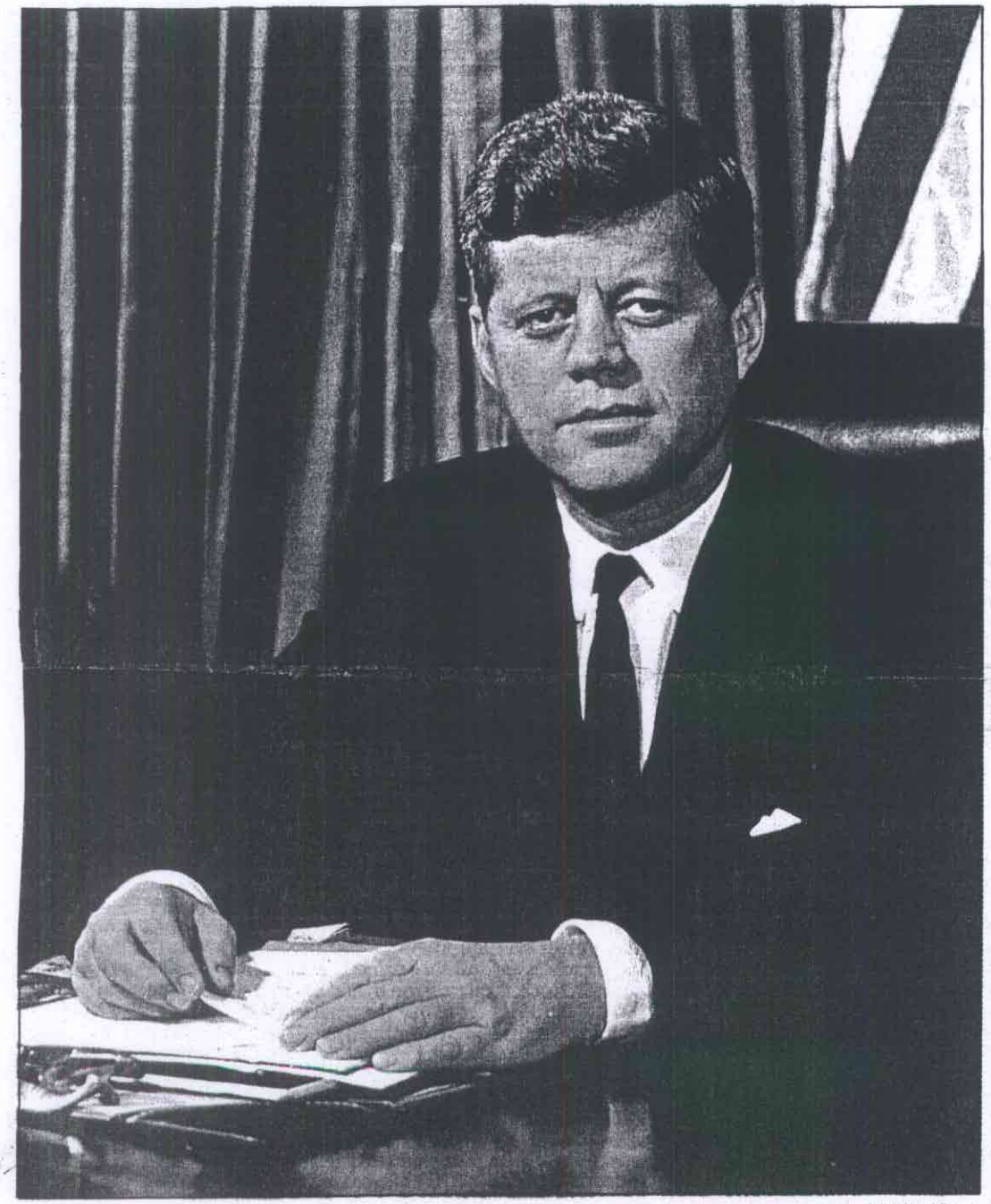

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John Fitzgerald Kennedy: He remains one of the nation's most admired presidents.

opposed to the protectionism and isolationism that characterize the thinking of its opponents.

But he lived in a different era when our international responsibilities seemed clear, employment opportunities were expanding and our economic dominance of the western world was unchallenged. Who is to say that given today's vastly changed, financially pinched circumstances Kennedy's views would have remained constant?

This business of reinventing Kennedy for modern purposes is one that anyone can play, and lots of people with less understanding than Clinton about his presidency do.

As the Hearst White House correspondent during the Kennedy administration, I sometimes barely recognize the pragmatic politician I remember in the stuff now written and broadcast about him.

For that half of the population born after his death, he is a distant, undefined figure, to be deified or demonized.

The basic problem with re-creating the past is that it is past. The puzzles and pressures of the 1960s that shaped Kennedy's life and thinking bear little resemblance to the social and economic challenges and op-

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portunities that confront us today.

Such practical difficulties do not stop the gold rush. Television is airing more than a dozen Kennedy-related specials of varying interest and quality before the 30th anniversary of his death on Monday.

Several new books are in the stores, including a valuable and straightforward assessment of Kennedy administration decision-making by Richard Reeves. There is a large complement of Kennedy anniversary magazine articles.

Through the decades, Kennedy has remained one of the nation's most admired presidents. Public curiosity about him is insatiable. Whenever interest shows signs of flagging, his relatives, including several politicians with ambitions of their own, fan the flames again.

For our national sanity, perhaps we simply need to think there once was a president we actually liked.

Kennedy's assassination immediately transformed him into a mythical figure whose fate, career and glamorous lifestyle became fascinating fodder for the ages.

The image of his youthful vigor is frozen in time for us, although he was in fact, as Reeves documents, never very healthy during the White House years.

Kennedy is remembered as a popular president. Yet he was elected by a margin of only half a percentage point, his approval ratings were about 58 percent shortly before he died and Sen. Barry Goldwater was given a good chance of beating him for reelection.

He is remembered as a president of great achievement. Yet his legislative record was thin and he dragged his feet about challenging racial segregation for fear of offending the South. He did not go to hear Martin Luther King speak during the 1963 March on Washington, although he could hear King's voice over loudspeakers from the nearby mall through his office door, open to the warm August sunshine.

He is remembered as the activist leader of the last federal administration that functioned successfully. This view is heavily colored by the fact that he benefited from an approving public attitude toward government that has steadily eroded. Voters were not as cynical about their public servants then as they are now.

If alive, he would be 76 this year and no doubt as wrinkled and cranky as those who knew him.

A small band of White House correspondents who followed him to Dallas and looked upon the empty blood-splattered convertible outside Parkland Hospital that awful day will hold a reunion on Monday. We will try to recall correctly how he was and what happened, but we'll probably get it wrong, too.

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Remembering Kennedy: His death immediately transformed him into a mythical figure whose fate, career and glamorous lifestyle became fascinating fodder for the ages.